



# Pelé's Portraitist

Artist finds emotional truth in painting the likenesses of others

By Cathleen Ferraro

**E**arly last month, Davis portrait painter Deladier Almeida delicately rolled two life-size paintings he recently completed of retired soccer star Pelé around PVC pipe and took them to Santos, Brazil. Once there, Almeida presented his works to the famous Brazilian athlete.

Pelé commissioned Almeida in 2005 to create two paintings of himself: one that will hang in the soccer hero's office and the other destined for the permanent collection of the Pelé Museum in Santos, the city where Almeida, 46, was born and raised and where Pelé, now 65, spent most of his career.

Arguably, the moment Almeida applied final brush strokes, signed the portraits in front of Pelé and watched as the athlete, in turn, signed the paintings, was the pinnacle of Almeida's career. That moment last month marked the end of the artist's long labor to capture Pelé on canvas, but also the beginning of a special legacy Almeida hopes he has created.

"The Pelé portraits will be more important after his death," he said. "They will continue providing information about the life of a man—what he said and did, the way he was represented—once he is no longer alive."

Almeida is unique among California painters. He is one of the few artists statewide who regularly does portraits and is widely recognized for creating compelling images. Many portrait painters left California in the 1930s,



Davis portrait painter Deladier Almeida in front of the life-size painting of Pelé in his studio

leaving the tradition concentrated on the East Coast.

For Almeida, however, the path of portrait painting appeared to be laid out before him even before he could write his name.

At the age of 5, Almeida regularly begged his relatives to sit for him while he quickly and intuitively sketched their likeness in pencil. For his parents, their son's compulsion seemed to spring from nowhere:

Almeida's mother was a seamstress and his father and uncles worked as longshoremen. Nobody was a painter.

"I'm really an oddball," Almeida said without a trace of self-deprecation. "But my relatives were amused and curious. . . . And I was getting people to look at me. A 5-year old wants attention and I got it. I was distinguishing myself."

Almeida also stood out when he won a contest—again at the

age of 5—centered on drawing a scooter. The prize was an atlas of Brazilian historical figures and their accomplishments. Filled with dozens of portraits of national heroes, the giant book became Almeida's bible. He constantly looked at and studied—in his childlike way—the faces of people from history whose significance he didn't understand.

But the details of their eyes, noses, mouths, cheeks and hair kept drawing

him back. Almeida would sneak off regularly to draw at night despite his father's pleas to go to bed. Back then, at just 6 years old, Almeida made an important artistic discovery: He figured out that drawing a grid on top of each photograph and transferring the grid lines to another piece of paper enabled him to duplicate portraits of the Brazilian historical figures. The upshot was the young, emerging artist found a way to break down each image into manageable, paintable squares.

"I later found out, as a teenager, that that's how all the great Italian painters did it," Almeida said, "to get the proportions right."

By his early 20s, Almeida was working as an illustrator for one of South America's largest and most respected newspapers, *O Estado de São Paulo*. During his two-year stint, Almeida created more than 100 pen-and-ink editorial illustrations and caricatures of political leaders around the world, including Henry Kissinger, Yasser Arafat, Ronald Reagan and Saddam Hussein.

On his own time, he'd paint, but he didn't consider it a viable option for making steady money.

At the same time, Almeida was studying architecture at Catholic University of Santos. During this period, he met his future wife, Robbie Young, an American exchange student from University of California, Davis who was studying at the University of São Paulo.

The couple married in Brazil in 1985, and Almeida followed Young back to Davis, where he studied with the likes of artists Wayne Thiebaud and Roland Petersen. By 1990, he had graduated from UC Davis with a bachelor's degree in art studio.

For more than a decade, Almeida worked as a graphic artist and web designer. But something wasn't right.

"I knew I wasn't doing what I had been psyching myself to do, to paint," Almeida said. "It's very scary to project an uncertain path, especially since we have a family (of three children). Most full-time painters don't make it, or they have a second job."

Relying on Young's job as a systems analyst for the California Public Employees Retirement System, the couple took the plunge in 2002. Almeida—then 40 and largely working for one company under contract with the California Department of Corrections—simply quit.

In the beginning, the fears came true: Almeida had no income from his paintings for two solid years.

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But he persevered. During this time, Almeida created one of the building blocks of his painting method that he still uses daily. He made a giant color key in the form of 12 boards. Each board has 55 small squares of color. One board comprises 11 colors in five different strengths—from the boldest intensity to the weakest depending on how much white was added to each color.

Each of the other 11 boards belongs to one color, such as "cadmium yellow deep" or "dioxazine purple," which was mixed with 10 other colors. The result is 12 charts filled with exactly the same-size squares, each reflecting different color combinations and intensities.

"It took me three months to create these 12 charts," Almeida said. "It was important to go through this exercise because it has become a

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shortcut to finding the right hue. It was my way, too, of getting acquainted with the palette.”

Most days, Almeida toils in the family garage, where he has created a comfortable space with bold lighting, dozens of brushes, paints, easels and what Leonardo da Vinci called a painter’s best friend: a mirror. Almeida actually uses three mirrors: one nearby over his right shoulder and two more across the room. Each mirror allows him to see problems that aren’t evident when sitting directly in front of a work in progress. They also give him perspective, the angle from which a viewer might eventually gaze at his work.

“This (mirror method) is not new, but not many people do it,” Almeida said. “I never work without a mirror because you can see from a radically different point of view, to see shapes and colors and how they are relative. If I keep looking at the canvas

over and over, I get tired and my perception is degraded.”

After five intense years of trying to make it as a full-time painter, Almeida has several accomplishments that have made the experiment worth the risk.

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For one, he is represented by two galleries now: the John Natsoulas Gallery in Davis and the Dharma Studio in Coconut Grove, Florida.

In 2003, he entered a contest in *The Artist’s Magazine* that typically draws about 14,000 entries worldwide. Almeida took third place for a portrait of Max Mack, a media consultant in Sacramento.

Later that same year, Almeida was accepted to both the Northern and Southern California chapters of the American Society of Portrait Artists.

Two years later, he taught a private workshop on portrait painting at Brighton University in Brighton, England.

Finally, there is the Pelé contract and resulting paintings, prompted after Almeida wrote a letter to the soccer icon and national hero, asking to paint his image.

While best known for his portraits, Almeida also paints lush landscapes such as the Sacramento Valley’s patchwork farmland and rivers. He has a talent, too, for capturing people in less formal settings, such

as clusters of tourists viewing art in a museum or all straining to get a photograph of the same attraction.

“When I move from one type of painting to another, it helps me with the medium I’m not working on,” Almeida said.

Still, the challenge to create a sustaining portrait—one that will outlive him and the subject being painted—attracts Almeida again and again. He says that a serious painter has to go beyond the details of presenting someone’s likeness, that one has to remind a viewer of who a person is and show what it feels like to be in front of that subject, to create an “emotional emanation” of the person.

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